DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 287 582 PS 016 898

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TITLE Play and the Quality of Life in Childhood.
PUB DATE Jul 86
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the World Congress Meeting of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (18th, Jerusalem, Israel, July 13-17, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Children; *Cultural Differences; *Definitions; Foreign Countries; *Play; *Quality of Life; Teacher Responsibility
IDENTIFIERS *Israel

ABSTRACT

The widespread assumption that play enhances the quality of children's lives is investigated in this paper. Theorists and rsearchers have given the word "play" definitions which emphasize (1) its complexity and degree of approximaton of the adult world, (2) initial conditions and themes and motives that characterize the realization of different types of play, (3) outcomes, and (4) the extent to which players are governed by rules. Caillois (1979) defined play as an activity that is free, separate in time and space, uncertain, unproductive, regulated, and fictive. Huizinga (1939) viewed total involvement as the essence of play and the basis for the catharsis that players achieve. The consideration of the relation between play and quality of life begins with an investigation of Baier's (1974) definition of 'quality of life' as the unspecified degree to which regional, physical, and social environments provide the conditions which allow for optimal life advancement. This definition facilitates thought about how play contributes to optimal life advancement. Since social structure and process determine the nature of play in a given sociocultural milieu, only onsite research can uncover the meaning of play in a given society and the connections between play and the quality of life. (RH)

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Play and the Quality of Life in Childhood

Presented at the OMEP Intl. Conference, Jerusalem, July, 1986

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At first sight, the juxtaposition of the terms 'play' and 'quality of life' seems no more than natural and obvious. Let us look at some examples, however, in order to see whether this assumption is always correct. I would like to remind you of some scenes that all of us are familiar with.

A group of kids is running around in a neighborhood park, yelling. One boy catches hold of another and does not let go until the second one bursts out crying. In the meantime, two children are suddenly on the ground, squirming and flailing at each other. This kind of behavior has been defined as 'rough and tumble' play. Is such play an indication of a desirable 'quality of life'?

Or, think of a see-saw. Two girls in the yard of the kindergarten take their places at either end. They slowly

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move the see-saw up and down. But all the time they are carrying on an orderly conversation. Sometimes a third child joins them and rocks back and forth while sitting in the middle of the board. Is this play?

Children frequently act out situations with 'mommy, daddy, the children, and some aunts' in which all the participants quarrel heartily. Or, they create scenes of 'going to the doctor' replete with severe illnesses and even 'being dead'. What does this kind of identification with sadness and sordidness in day to day reality contribute to a desirable quality of life?

In none of these vignettes is the relationship between play and the quality of life unambiguous. In order to see what connections are possible, I propose to examine how 'play' and the 'quality of life' can be defined.

Play

It is usually taken for granted that observers know play when they see it. Therefore psychologists interested in play are concerned with its developmental trajectory rather than in the mere definition. Development is evaluated in terms of the complexity of play and on the basis of its approximation of the adult world (Piaget, 1971; Werner and Kaplan, 1967).

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In a more catholic vein, Caillois (1979) has distinguished four universal types of play. They are differentiated in their initial conditions, as well as in the themes and motives that characterize their realization.

He describes two types of competitive play in which all the participants have an equal opportunity to win. 'Agon' is the generic name for games such as poker, chess, or soccer, in which the players are called upon to demonstrate different levels of skill. The competitive play that he calls 'Alea' is expressed in games of chance in which outcomes are independent of the players' will or talents.

In Caillois' scheme, there are also two types of play in which the desirable outcome is escape. Players who engage in 'mimicry' are escaping from themselves by incessantly inventing ways of being Alter, or An Other. And 'ilinx', or play in pursuit of vertigo, is, in Caillois' terms, equivalent to an effort at escaping everything that is human!

In this framework, there is no necessary congruence between the type of play and the degree to which it is governed by rules. The mode of participation in play in various situations, may range from the utterly spontaneous (what Caillois calls 'paidia') to the highly rule-governed (or

'ludus').

As Caillois points out, these categories and their crossing with varying levels of spontaneity or rule-governance provide a useful typology although not necessarily an exhaustive catalogue. What is essential is the spirit in which play is carried on.

Play is an activity that is **free, separate in time and space, uncertain, unproductive, regulated,** and **fictive** (Caillois, 1979, pp. 9-10). Children who engage in play can be said to be living a contradiction. As has been noted, play commences with an initial decision to step out of reality so to speak (Bateson, 1972; Groos, 1901); yet it embodies a kind of dialogue with the adult world, serving the child as a kind of filter for relevant rules (Chambert de Lauwe, 1975).

Being totally involved is the essence of play and the basis for the catharsis that players achieve. Huizinga (1939) insists that this play spirit is the essential impulse of culture. The same spirit can be said to govern an evolutionary shift from social reality to play. Many toys and games of today (masks, chess, tin soldiers, for example) were once the serious business of a complex society. Having lost their historical functions, these objects have been coopted into "the eternal antagonism of play and ordinary life"

(Caillois, 1979, p. 63).

Quality of Life

Any discussion of the quality of life for adults refers to increasingly acute problems of pollution. Like many industrial societies, Israel, too, must cope with the contamination of its resources. There is a serious shortage of drinking water. The air we breathe has to be monitored for pollutants. Traffic jams aggravate air pollution and add to the noise that is suspected of causing problems of deafness (cf. Greenberg, 1979). In general, researchers tend to attribute a low quality of life to the stresses and strains of urbanization, and most especially to the condition of poverty.

It is often assumed that children suffer from the same problems that cause adult discomfort. Yet, it is difficult to measure the exact extent to which childhood is undermined by the 'objective' states of pollution, for the concrete influences are determined not a little by socialization practices. According to Wohlwill & Vliet (1985), the impact on children of poverty when measured in density and crowding, noise, intensive interaction, and so on, has not been shown to be necessarily bad.

A definition of the quality of life that avoids the need for a detailed examination of how human needs are met has been suggested by Baier (1974). In his view, the quality of life can be defined as "the unspecified degree to which the regional, physical, and social environment possesses a certain evaluative property, namely, [an ability to promote] 'optimal-life-advancement.'" In this connection it is necessary to specify the interests that will be served when the properties it is "rational to want" are present.

This approach must amend our reading and understanding of Principle 7 of the United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of Children. "The child must have all the possibilities of giving himself up to games and recreative activities which are oriented toward ends foreseen by education. Society and public authorities must see to the enjoyment of this right." The form and the content of games and recreative activities, however, cannot be assumed to be the same the world over.

Using this definition, we can indeed consider the possibility of different interpretations of play, and of the contribution it can make to 'optimal-life-advancement.' From cross-cultural studies of play (Avedon & Sutton-Smith, 1971; Schwartzman, 1978), it is clear that different kinds of societies give rise to different kinds of play.

The distinctions among different types of games and attributes of play sketched above are a framework for the **description** of play, but in no sense can they be presumed to be **normative.** To be consistent, we must recognize that social structure and process determine the nature of play in a given socio-cultural milieu. Only research on site - observation and talk with the people involved - can uncover the meaning of play in a given society. And hence the possible connections between play and the quality of life.

There are differences of opinion among educators and among researchers in education about the good that play can do for a child, and hence the duty of the adult in promoting children's play. There are also differences of opinion between children and adults.

To illustrate this, I will refer briefly to the interpretation of play that guides educators in Israel and the interpretations that children in nursery schools and in kindergartens provide. Agents of socialization and the socializees do not seem to agree on the contribution of play to the quality of life.

Interpretations of What it Means to Play in Israel

A. Among educators in Israel, there is a great deal of

emphasis on the importance of play for improving the lot of children. It is considered to be a decisive factor in a child's socialization (Feitelson & Ross, 1972). Oriented toward extrinsic rewards, they think that the contribution of play to a person's self-fulfillment will be revealed in the future - in the ability to apply rules and act rationally in new situations and in other places. The type of play that is most valued, then, is 'mimicry' and the criterion for judging play is the degree of its 'true-to-life' complexity (Feitelson et al., 1973; Piaget, 1971). In their view, to play is to use time for a maximization of social and intellectual development (Smilansky, 1968).

This stand is supported by researchers who analyze socialization as role-learning (Brim, 1960). Another touchstone is the development of creativity. In some of the literature on creativity, it is identified when there are visible products. This implies that intellectual capacities are valued over the capacity for contemplation. The ability to solve problems is taken to be indicative of creative talents (Buttimer, p. 20).

If, however, creativity is understood to be a psychological state, then one must view the potential contribution of play from a different angle. Maslow reports that " ... a fair proportion of my subjects, though healthy and creative ....

were not productive in the ordinary sense .... I learned that a first rate soup is more creative than a second-rate painting, and that generally cooking or parenthood or making a home could be creative while poetry need not be ... "(1961, pp. 127-128). This wider perspective on creativity implies a more flexible valuation of play.

B. In a recent study (Kalekin-Fishman, forthcoming), we asked people of various ages to contrast and compare children and adults. Adult respondents emphasized the frivolity of childhood, saying that play characterizes children. Similarly, all of the child respondents, aged 3 to 6 (51 girls and 43 boys; 63 Jews and 31 Arabs) cited play as belonging to children. In specifying what constitutes play, they demonstrated a grasp of the subject that is quite different from that of the adults.

Children were far less likely to attribute intellectual ends and outcomes to play. The respondents of nursery age connected play with people and when pressed for details told of playing with parents, siblings and friends. In a field study in kindergartens (Kalekin-Fishman, in press), we researchers carried out observations of several days in 16 kindergartens. Subsequently we asked 7 - 10 children in each kindergarten to tell them what they do during a session. Most children volunteered that play is "what we do" in the

kindergarten. It is done "with my friend" and after, or before, a teacher-scheduled activity. They explained that when activity is ended, they "have fun and play."

In contrast to the long-term view of educators, children referred to intrinsic rewards. They talked about games that are on-going in the present. The guiding rule was 'being with ...' friends. Games were evaluated on the basis of the degree of involvement and the fun they allowed. Children referred to play as the activity by means of which they escape the rules that adults make, or indeed the requirements of having rules when they were so inclined. In the eyes of the children-socializees, the attraction of play lies in its being a **waste** of time.

In my studies, I have learned that Israelis who have immigrated from other countries, like Israelis born in different areas of the state, and in urban and rural settings share extensive knowledge of play. There is knowledge of 'real' games such as hide and go seek, marbles, or jacks often according to slightly different customs or rules. In games with 'stones' for example, Druse children throw all the stones they win down the well at the 'end of the season' while Jewish children in an urban environment carefully lay their winnings aside to await the re-opening of the season and to start with an advantage. Adults from diverse

backgrounds share memories about telling secrets and having fights that they also called 'play.'

Children in every society have cultures of play. The Opies have painstakingly documented games and lore of English children (Opie & Opie, 1959; 1969). Avedon & Sutton-Smith (1971) present an extensive record of children's play in places scattered all over the world.

Do all kinds of play insure a high quality of life?

Problems

We started out by proposing to examine the relationship between play and the quality of life, how best to advance 'optimal-life-advancement.' Shall we emphasize freedom or constraint? spontaneity and self-propulsion (autonomy) or learning and adaptation (rationality) in promoting activities that are called play and games?

In attempting to judge the contribution of play to the quality of life, we must not forget that an acceptable criterion for a person in a given region depends on his optimal life. As adults - parents and educators alike - we would like to make sure that every child will be helped "to lead a life in accordance with a life plan whose

execution [she] ... would find at each of its stages at least as fulfilling as that of any other" (Baier, 1974, pp. 76 - 77). To have confidence in a decision to support a given type of play, we would have to test play over a very long period of time and apply multiple evaluative criteria. After all, the place of play in the quality of life cannot be taken for granted.

A gut feeling tells us that promoting play is a good thing. But how we promote play and what kind of encouragement we offer children are dependent on a thoroughly thought out understanding of the social construction of the quality of life. Furthermore, we must develop an accepting heart so that we may begin to penetrate the mystery of the experience and the promise of children's play.

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